

Trebeck, K., Black, I. and Shaw, D. (2016) Changing the narrative: measuring progress by measuring what matters to families. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 5(3), pp. 467-472.
(doi: [10.1332/204674316X14758514931865](https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X14758514931865))

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Deposited on: 24 October 2016

SPECIAL ISSUE • Families, Relationships and the Environment:
Climate Change, Sustainability and Biodiversity

open space

Changing the narrative: Measuring progress by measuring what matters to families

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Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has emerged as a dominant proxy for the success of a nation. At the micro level, a similar monetary orientation is manifest in the development of invidious materialism. This article supports a shift in the purpose of policy-making, away from GDP growth and towards an agenda in which participation and relationships are positioned as more desirable. It presents Oxfam Scotland's Humankind Index as replacement measure of national progress.

key words Gross Domestic Product (GDP) • prosperity • communities • policy-making
• participation

In the last part of the 20th century Gross Domestic Product (GDP) emerged as a dominant proxy for the success of a nation: national prowess (and geopolitical weight) came to be largely determined by size of GDP. At the micro level, a similar monetary orientation is manifest, *inter alia*, in the development of invidious materialism (noted in the introduction to these interrelated articles). Encouraged by the concurrent expansion of free market economics in government policy, the promotion of consumer credit and the sophisticated marketing activities of national and international firms, for many people the dominant mantra for living a successful, prosperous life has become equated with consumerism (Black et al, 2015). Thus, the prevailing narrative of success and the associated economic model reinforce each other in a way that drives consumerism. In contrast to these dynamics, it is relationships with our families, friends and communities, together with our health, that matter to people and to our sense of prosperity (Jackson, 2009). A profound misalignment between the goals of our economic model and what matters to people seems to be at play.

This article supports a shift in the purpose of policy-making – away from GDP growth and towards an agenda in which participation and relationships are positioned as more desirable than (invidious) materialistic consumption. Such a shift is a key

aspect of building an economy and society that supports families and communities and in addressing the impact of the consumerist economy on the planet. In order to direct this shift, this article presents Oxfam Scotland's Humankind Index as a measure of national progress, one that encompasses a broad range of collective prosperity dimensions distilled, via a mixed methods consultation, from what communities in Scotland say is key to their flourishing. It was published at a time when many in Scotland, due to the 2014 independence referendum, were asking 'what sort of country do we want to live in?', and so it was able to contribute to national and local conversations about what progress and success entail. The factors that emerged from the participatory process used to construct the index are not, however, thought to be unique to Scotland.

Pressures to consume

While products and services give us what marketers describe as functional and symbolic benefits, they can often be a burden. A vicious circle of marketing stimulated over-consumption emerges: status anxiety (intensified by inequality) coupled with debt leads to having to work long hours; which leads to exhaustion and stress; which leads to poor diet and stimulates more over-consumption. It is perhaps unsurprising that headteachers in the UK have recently reported a rise in the number of children who are self-harming or who are contemplating suicide (ASCL, 2016). In a range of countries, increased use of anti-depressants was observed between 2005 and 2012: a rise of over 26% in the US; 54.4% in the UK; over 60% in Denmark; almost 18% in the Netherlands; and in Germany, a rise of almost 50% (Bachmann et al, 2016).

Often the burdens of consumerist pressures fall most heavily on families with the least resources to shoulder it: people experiencing poverty who, following a quite natural and very human instinct to fit in and belong, sometimes use consumption to avoid being 'visibly poor' (Hamilton, 2012). At the top end of the income distribution levels of consumption do much more damage in terms of environmental impact (Kenner, 2015). Part of this expenditure can be attributed to a process of emulation among high-income groups that propels conspicuous consumption (Kempf, 2008). Such widespread (but very unequal; see Chancel and Piketty, 2015) consumerism has placed a burden on our environment (Steffen et al, 2015). It contributes to the loss of habitat, the crisis in environmental pollutants, and – where people struggle to feed themselves – the burden of social unrest and crisis in government.

Misalignment

We are now seeing consumer, government and business action to address some of the environmental problems the world faces, including, potentially, signs of a small decoupling of economic growth from greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (IEA, 2016). While these signs of resistance and change are most welcome, ultimately the world is still using more resources and creating more waste each year. Much has been written about how relationships with our families, friends and communities, along with our health, are the things that matter most to people and to our sense of prosperity (Jackson, 2009). What really provides fulfilment is spending time with friends, helping others, being in nature, decent work and having control over one's life (Dunlop and Trebeck, 2012) (Pretty et al, 2015). Yet, as we explain later, without a shift in narrative to one

of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’, more neoliberal economic and social policies will continue as governments downplay the importance of society. It seems that there is a misalignment between people’s deep-seated goals and the GDP-orientated goals of our economic and political system. The remainder of this article reflects on an attempt to develop more appropriate macro measures of success.

Measuring for relating and sustaining

To inculcate the narrative of ‘we’ – a pro-social, pro-people, pro-planet narrative – we need a shift in what measures are accorded policy priority. At the macro level this needs to centre on a move away from GDP as a measure of *societal* progress to more broad-ranging assessments of prosperity. There is a growing body of work on this – from the OECD to The World Bank, from the SKOLL Foundation to the New Economics Foundation (nef). The following sections explore one example of an attempt to shift the attention of policy-makers to what really matters to communities by creating a measure of Scotland’s progress constructed with the participation of communities.

Oxfam Scotland’s Humankind Index sought to build a process that would identify the factors that Scottish people – in particular, ‘seldom-heard’ people – themselves identified as key to their flourishing. The approach was founded in a consultation that encouraged participants to reflect on what is important to them and their communities. The consultation asked ‘What do you need to live well in your community?’ This consultation – being not only participatory but also making a concerted effort to reach out to deprived communities – is in contrast to other beyond-GDP initiatives that typically engage only experts (in the formal sense) to determine components and even weightings. It also emphasises *collective* prosperity rather than individual wellbeing or happiness (it is not about creating an index that simply aggregates each individual’s assessments of their own satisfaction).

The consultation drew on both qualitative and quantitative techniques for data collection – using focus group interviews (semi-structured) and task-based group activities in conjunction with surveys (see Walker et al, 2012, for a full description of the methodology). Mechanisms included focus groups, community workshops, street stalls, an online survey and a representative poll. In order to reach and include a diversity of participants, focus groups involved a range of groups and individuals (selected on the basis of demographic characteristics, including, but not limited to gender, age, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and geography). Community workshops and street stalls were held in various parts of Scotland. The views of over 3,000 people were considered in the preparation of the index, and this has been vital to the credibility and, hence, influence of the final product. In particular, that the Humankind Index was constructed by putting the voices of seldom-heard groups to the fore proved particularly important.

The New Economics Foundation gathered these views and distilled them into a list of priorities. They used a classification framework based on the sub-domains that the respondents voted for at the events and open responses to the survey. This framework was then populated using the survey responses, the results from focus groups and elements of the community workshops. This classification process was carried out iteratively with revisions to the framework made as required. This process revised the initial list of sub-domains that was voted on by participants at events. These priorities that emerged (‘factors of prosperity’) were given a weighting reflecting their relative

importance to people (see Table 1). These were crossed-checked using a representative opinion poll carried out by the polling company YouGov.

Results

Areas of life that communities identified as making a real difference to their lives are health and housing, followed by quality of our environment, strength of friendships and the safety of those we care about (Table 1). Satisfaction derived from work is one of the top priorities, not work per se, and security and sufficiency of income are important to people, not having income levels enjoyed by the very wealthy.

Table 1: Factors of prosperity

Sub-domain	Weighting
Affordable/ decent home + Having a safe and secure home	11
Being physically and mentally healthy	11
Living in a neighbourhood where you can enjoy going outside + Having a clean and healthy environment	9
Having satisfying work to do (whether paid or unpaid)	7
Having good relationships with family and friends	7
Feeling that you and those you care about are safe	6
Access to green/wild spaces + open spaces/play areas	6
Secure work/suitable work	5
Having enough money to pay the bills and buy what you need	5
Having a secure source of money	5
Access to arts/culture/hobbies/leisure activities	5
Having the facilities you need available locally	4
Getting enough skills and education to live a good life	4
Being part of a community	4
Having good transport to get to where you need to go	4
Being able to access high-quality services	3
Human rights/freedom from discrimination/acceptance/respect	2
Feeling good	2
Total	100

Impact

An independent evaluation revealed that the Humankind Index has garnered strong political interest in Scotland and has had considerable success in stimulating a debate about the future of Scotland's National Performance Framework (see Barlow et al, 2014). This evaluation concluded that the Humankind Index has done 'a great deal' to promote a greater appreciation of the need for economic growth to be pursued with

an understanding of the needs of all communities, especially those living in poverty, and what success/improved quality of life might mean for them.

It appears to have become a tool by which a range of partners, including civil society organisations and individual MSPs from a range of political parties, articulate the need for an alternative to GDP as a measure of economic success. Indeed, the participatory nature of the development of the index is often referred to by third parties, suggesting that this feature has given the index legitimacy and increased its impact among the policy community in Scotland.

Initiatives such as the Humankind Index are practical manifestations of efforts to re-purpose economic and governance systems that will help move away from the narrative of 'I' to the narrative of 'we'. This narrative will, for example, pursue measures of participation such as number of volunteers or rate of participation in community activities and survey assessments of community cohesion as an indicator of progress.

Policy implications

As such indicators shape policy decisions (e.g., as part of the Scottish government's refresh of its National Performance Framework and its own 'Fairer Scotland' consultation in 2015), it is hoped that they will help construct a context more conducive to allowing families to align their underlying understandings of what matters (as revealed by the results of the Humankind Index consultation, for example) with day-to-day activities. This would elevate participation, experiences and relationship cultivation, rather than purchasing, as a key goal. Shaw et al (Places of prosumption: Community gardens putting the 'we' into neighbourhoods (manuscript, FRS-D-16-00059) explore an example of where this is occurring via community garden participation in Glasgow, Scotland.

Such a context, which moves from a consumption-based life to one based on participation in society, requires that participation is possible for all. Practical implications of this include creating spaces that are seen as safe (physically, socially, culturally and psychologically), and that do not constrain by reinforcing gender roles, for example. Part of this will come from the culture in our schools and education system, driven by an education that inculcates cooperation, sharing and collaboration, rather than competition and hierarchy.

Conclusion

This article has briefly illustrated one of a growing field of 'beyond GDP' initiatives. The Oxfam Humankind Index was built by emphasising deliberative spaces in which people described what they needed to live well in their communities. While based on a consultation with people living in Scotland and targeted, initially, at a Scottish audience, its lessons are not seen as unique to this context. By adopting as measures of national progress issues that matters to people, families and communities, it is hoped that policies more aligned with their aspirations will follow from governments.

Note

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